

By MIKE WHITESMAN : Leytonstone 2, Wycombe W. 2

WANDERERS' first real testing in the heavy going was enough to ensure every practising rain-maker within sixty minutes' drive of Wycombe is banished from now until eternity.

On the mudflats at Leytonstone, the Blues' lightweight forward line looked good for as long as it took lashing rain and clogging ground conditions to subdue them — with the help of an international-class performance by home captain, John Charles.

As majestic as Wycombe's own Ted Powell, as forceful as John Delaney, Charles warranted the man-of-the-match award well before Stones' late equaliser had wiped off a two-goal deficit from the first half.

But Charles had every reason to turn it on for Wanderers' benefit. His fatal last minute own goal had given the Blues a winning breakthrough they had unsuccessfully strived for on their trip to the East Londoners last season.

That match had been played under a thunder and lightning storm which made Saturday's downpour mild by comparison. And Wycombe can expect far worse to come in the way of winter hazards.

Their fast, mobile style will need some subtle revision; either that or one or two players should set about quickening their reflexes. Several of them were obviously not quite as confident in the trickier conditions.

Wanderers have proved themselves masters in the dry. But championships are often won or lost in the wet, icy and demanding months on either side of Christmas. And their Isthmian League position is already weakening.

While Sutton have six points extra in the bag, Wanderers must now win all three games in hand to keep abreast of them. It's not scare talk, it's statistical fact.

It's also statistically true that Wycombe were two goals up by half-time, yet came away with only one point, despite fielding the identical line-up to that which butchered Kettering in the F.A. Cup only seven days earlier.

The Blues kicked off with all the confidence stored up at Kettering's expense. Their football in fact was always of at least a reasonable standard, the heavy conditions alone restricting them.

They were worth their lead at the interval, and could just as easily have kept it to the end. Certainly they were never outplayed. Both Leytonstone goals came as isolated incidents in a second half dominated by neither side.

Not even the presence of skipper Charles could ease Leytonstone's jitters in defence with Wycombe poking the ball from all directions into their goalmouth from the start.

The wings, where Johnny Hutchinson worked overtime, brought a constant threat for the Stone's to quell. But Wanderers too were being stretched right across field by an effective, if unoriginal ploy, of building on the right before crossing the width of the pitch with one big kick for Alan Noonan to use the open space thus created.

Adrenalin often ran high as a result, but never more so than in the 12th minute, when with scores level, Leytonstone's adventurous number three, Brian Moffatt crashed the ball in from the left wing at an acute angle. A horrible handling error by Kevin O'Brien seemed to have given away a goal, as the ball trickled nearer the line. But a desperate scramble and quick recovery by the 'keeper retrieved the situation with a split second to spare.

The match did a complete about turn a minute later, when Hutchinson moved possession to Paul Fuschillo, and a cutting centre found Tony Horseman ready to sidewick the ball into goal while Leytonstone guardian Tony Mackie looked the wrong way, and two defenders, who had been covering the Wycombe raider, wondered exactly how he forged an opening.

Wanderers looked well on the way to ending Leytonstone's unbeaten League run going back to their earlier 3-1 defeat at Loakes Park, when they went 2-0 up in the 23rd minute.

Again Hutchinson was behind the move, centring a corner from the right, for Delaney to tower above everyone in the jump and place a header into the net.

Home spirits reached a new low after 34 minutes with a leg injury to Dave Andrews, sustained in a collision involving O'Brien during one particularly dangerous Leytonstone raid.

Andrews retired for treatment off field, and six minutes later, Leytonstone manager Alan Minall risked committing his substitute, Ed Brown.

Leytonstone used lightning tactics from the second half resumption, and a goal within two minutes opened the entire game up again. Noonan slipped the ball to Bobby Hames, for a cross met on the run by Fred Claydon, who headed past O'Brien with the Wycombe backs caught totally off guard.

O'Brien's bravery couldn't hide the problems he met in handling a slippery ball. And a second half leg injury made things worse. The 'keeper was perhaps unhappier than any with the conditions.

Also less than his normal decisive self, Keith Blunt took that extra moment to act on several occasions. His pass back to O'Brien in the 32nd minute rolled slowly in the mud and only Kevin's quick reactions beat Claydon to the kick.

Nonetheless, Leytonstone equalised eight minutes from time, Moffatt curling the ball deceptively from 18 yards out, with O'Brien lost by the flight of his shot.

LEYTONSTONE: A. Mackie; A. Jennings, B. Moffatt, D. Andrews (sub.: E. Brown, 34th min.), P. Scott, J. Charles, A. Noonan, P. Diwell, F. Claydon, R. Hames, B. Harvey.

WYCOMBE WANDERERS: K. O'Brien; K. Blunt, P. Fuschillo, E. Powell, J. Delaney, L. Hartridge, L. Pritchard, A. Horseman, K. Searle, B. Bremer, J. Hutchinson. Sub.: B. Baker (not used).

Referee: Mr. B. Mahoney.

Half time: 0-2. **Goalscorers:** Leytonstone—Claydon (47), Moffat (82). Wycombe—Horseman (13), Delaney (23).

Leytonstone 2 Wycombe 2

WYCOMBE MUST be wondering why they had to share the points in a game they seemed to have won decisively. They were two up at half-time through an opportunist effort by Horseman (15min) and a header from Delaney from a corner. But they dissipated their advantage when Claydon scored for Leytonstone a minute after the interval, followed by a 77th-minute Moffatt goal during a series of menacing Leytonstone raids in the final 15 minutes.